



Interpretation of Death Rituals: An Ethnographic Study with Special Reference to Phatong Borok

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 12-05-2025

Published: 10-06-2025

Keywords:

*Borok women, funeral
rituals, death songs, social
customs.*

ABSTRACT

Every belief system is expressed through various types of rituals that reflect the tradition, culture, and identity of a community. Similarly, in Tripura, numerous indigenous communities observe distinct rites and rituals that embody their cultural identity. This paper aims to investigate the death rites and rituals of the Borok people. When a person passes away, a series of rituals are performed until the body is cremated, with the intention of preventing any misfortune for the deceased's family and the wider village community. These rituals, rich in cultural significance, are gradually fading due to the impacts of acculturation, Western education, modernity, proselytization, and other socio-cultural influences. Therefore, the urgent need for documentation arises to preserve and explore these vanishing death rituals, which reflect the Borok community's worldview—particularly Borok women's perception, philosophy, and genealogy.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15652510>

1. Introduction



Tripura is one of the eight states of northeast and home to nineteen indigenous communities: *Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang, Uchoi, Noatia, Orang, Mog, Chakma, Lushai, Garo, Bhil, Santal, Lepcha, Halam, Bhutia, Kuki, Chaimal, Khasia and Munda*. All these tribes are found into three groups: Tibetan- Burman group, Kuki-chin group and the Arakan- group. There are a total of nine clans or sub-tribes speaking Kokborok which is a Tibeto-Burman language. The kokborok speaking tribes are - (1) *Tripura*, (2) *Reang* (3) *Jamatia*, (4) *Noatia*, (5) *Uchoi*, (6) *Kalai*, (7) *Rupini*, (8) *Debbarma* and (9) *Murasing*. All these nine clans or sub-tribes are addressed as “*Borok*”, “*Twiprasa*” and “*Tripuri*”.

In Borok society, the term equivalent to death is *kwthui*, meaning "lifeless." When someone passes away, it is said *langmachokha* or *thuikha*, which means "the breath has departed." The Borok people believe that an individual's lifespan is pre-destined while still in the mother's womb. Upon a death in the family, the relatives and neighbors are informed before the commencement of the entire set of death rituals. A priest, known as *ochai*, is invited to oversee and conduct the required rites and rituals. The announcement of death is traditionally made by beating a drum.

Cremation is typically deferred by a day to allow all family members to gather. However, in the case of elderly members, the cremation may be postponed for a longer period to accommodate the performance of additional rituals. A chicken is sacrificed at the feet of the corpse to serve as a companion for the deceased. It is believed that the spirit of the departed travels to a realm known as the Land of the Dead. On the night of cremation, the deceased, accompanied by the sacrificed chicken, must cross a river on the way to this fictional realm.

2. Death Rituals of the Borok:

There are some death rites, rituals and ceremonies that are observed by women. Some of the death rituals are as follows:

i. *Kakha Yaarnai*: The literal meaning of *kakha yaarnai* is “biting bitterness.” This ritual is performed immediately after the cremation, once all attendees have returned from the cremation site. It is specifically observed by members of the same clan (*luku*), and is conducted under the guidance of a priest. During the ritual, the priest sits facing the east, symbolizing spiritual orientation and renewal, while the participants are asked to bite dried fish and bitter gourd leaves. The symbolic act of biting bitterness signifies the process of purification. The purpose of *kakha yaarnai* is to cleanse the clan

members of ritual pollution associated with death, thereby enabling them to reintegrate into everyday life with spiritual and social purity.



Figure: 1 Display of the performance of *kakha yarnai* ritual

ii. *Kothui rath sanai*: The literal meaning of *kwthui rath sanai* is “pulling the chariot of the dead.” This ritual is primarily performed for elderly members of the community, either to fulfill their final wishes or to honour their life and celebrate their passing. The ritual symbolizes respect and reverence for a life well lived. A chariot is constructed using *muli* bamboo and wood, a process that typically takes around one and a half days. It is then adorned with various types of *malais* decorative flower-like structures crafted from bamboo. The body of the deceased is placed atop the chariot, and members of the community across different age groups take part in the ceremonial pulling. The chariot is pulled with ropes in an open field or along a pathway, with men and women pulling from opposite directions. This collective act of pulling symbolizes communal participation in the final journey of the deceased and reinforces the cultural values of unity, honour, and intergenerational respect within Borok society.



Figure: 2 Display of the *kwthui rath sanai*

iii. *Kwthui maikhalai*: The literal meaning of *kwthui maikhalai* is "offering rice to the deceased." It is considered the final rite in the journey of a human life and is traditionally conducted on the seventh morning after death. This ritual involves preparing a feast not only for the spirit of the deceased but also for relatives and neighbors. Before dawn, boars and chickens are cooked as offerings. The family, accompanied by priests and elderly members of the community, proceeds to the cremation site to present *kwthui mai* (rice for the deceased) to the departed spirit. After the offering is made, it is customary that no one looks back toward the tomb, symbolizing the closure of the ritual. The priests and elders then complete the remaining ceremonial rites.

3. Objectives

The main objectives of the research work are as follows:

- i. **To document** the traditional death rites and rituals practiced by the Borok community in Tripura.
- ii. **To explore** the cultural, spiritual, and social significance of these death rituals within the Borok belief system.
- iii. **To analyze** the impact of modern influences such as acculturation, Western education, and proselytization on the continuity of these practices.



4. Methodology used for the research work

Since the prime focus of the research paper is on rituals practiced by the Borok women, the researcher had used the perspectives of Cultural studies and Ritual Studies as the two dominant methodologies. In order to conduct the research, the researcher had used the ethnographic fieldwork as primary method to learn about the beliefs, rituals, and lives of the Borok people.

The researcher had chosen one district which is the South of the state where a large population of the tribe is settled. Since, there were no documented materials on death rituals, the research work had to heavily rely on the primary sources. The researcher had to depend on participant and non-participant observation, sampling methods, interview, structured and unstructured questionnaires, transcription and archival research

5. Significance of the research work

Although the Borok is one of the largest indigenous groups in Tripura, there has not been any serious study undertaken on its oral rituals. Over the decades, the traditional beliefs and rituals performances have changed through acculturation, commercialization and proselytization. Many traditional beliefs and festivals are no longer practiced by the members of the tribe today. Proper documentation, interpretation and contextualization of age-old traditions will help dispel the colonialist constructions of tribal practices as senseless, arbitrary and primitive and decolonize the image of the tribal identity among the younger generations.

6. Discussion

In conclusion, the death rites and rituals of the Borok community are not merely ceremonial acts but are deeply embedded in their cultural, spiritual, and social framework. These practices offer valuable insights into the community's worldview, particularly the roles and perspectives of Borok women. However, the erosion of these traditions under the pressures of modernization and external cultural influences poses a significant threat to their survival. Therefore, documenting and studying these rituals is not only essential for cultural preservation but also for understanding the identity and heritage of the Borok people in a rapidly changing world.



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